



Like a Hand Reaching Out

One freezing night – on January 18, 1945 – 15-year-old Jewish prisoner Max Eisen was forced to march out of Auschwitz, herded at gunpoint by SS guards with dogs. The prisoners were wearing wooden clogs and were slipping in the snow. Many prisoners were shot when they could not keep up the pace or had dropped out from exhaustion. Max walked for four or five days without food or water, only managing to pick up a few handfuls of snow for moisture on the way. Eventually, they were loaded onto open metal boxcars, whose sides were so cold their skin almost froze to the metal. When the boxcar arrived in Pilsen, some kindly Czech people appeared on the overhead bridge and began to throw pieces of bread into the open boxcars. The guards shouted, “Don’t throw any bread. These are Jews.” But the people just kept on throwing bread into the boxcars below until the guards started to shoot at them. For Max, even though he was too far away to snatch any of the bread, this was one of the most important moments of his life. After all he had been through, to learn there were still decent people left in the world – this began to restore the boy’s faith in the world. “It was like a hand reaching out to me,” Max tells the students. He never forgot the goodness of the people of Pilsen, for whom he felt a debt of gratitude every day of his life.

Max Eisen arrived in Auschwitz when he was only 15 years of age. After being beaten unconscious by an SS officer, a Polish doctor, Tadeusz Orzeszko, in Auschwitz took pity on Max, and saved him from certain death, by engaging him as an assistant in the camp’s clinic.

Max was liberated from Ebensee on May 6, 1945 by members of the 761st Tank Battalion, comprised of African-American soldiers in the then segregated American army. The troops were shocked by the piles of bodies they saw, and by the condition of the sick and emaciated prisoners, many of them dying in front of their eyes. “The black soldiers were horrified,” Max recalled, “I’ll never forget how big their eyes were. Without the 761st, I would not be here to tell the story,” he would say many times.

Max always wondered what happened to Dr. Orzeszko, if he had survived the war, and how he could ever repay him.

On the 2008 March of the Living, Max learned that the good doctor had indeed survived the war, and had passed away in 1974 in Radom at 67 years of age.

When Max met the members of Dr. Orzeszko’s family for the first time, they were moved to tears when they learned about his heroic efforts in saving Max’s life. And Max learned from them that Dr. Orzeszko was a member of the Polish resistance, carrying on activities even in the heart of this notorious death camp. The Eisen and Orzeszko families have grown extremely close since they discovered each other – Dr. Orzeszko’s latest great-grandchild was even named after Max.

Every time Max shares his story, the courage of the members of the 761st Battalion, and the kindness expressed by the people of Pilsen, and by a brave Polish doctor to a young Jewish boy, live on his thankful eyes.